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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000598

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: BOLIVARIAN HUBRIS: CHAVEZ WARNS OF US  
ASSASSINATION PLOT

Classified By: CDA STEPHEN G. MCFARLAND FOR 1.4 (D)

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Summary  
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[11.](#) (C) Summary: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez February 20 accused the USG, and President Bush specifically, of plotting to kill him. During his weekly television program, he warned the US President that if he were killed, his people would fight a follow-on US invasion and sever US oil shipments. Chavez's exaggerations illustrate his view that Venezuela crowns the agenda of US policymakers and media outlets. Chavez, who alluded to similar comments by Cuban President Fidel Castro, offered no justification for the accusations. Chavez has long demonstrated a suspicious, if not paranoid, approach to his security. Always an astute politician, Chavez is also using the fabricated accusations to paint himself as the leading crusader against US regional "hegemony" and to create a diversion from current Venezuelan problems. End summary.

[12.](#) (U) One week after Cuban leader Fidel Castro told the press that the US president would be to blame if Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez were killed, Chavez railed against alleged US plots in his February 20 "Alo Presidente" show. "Absolutely sure" that the United States was considering his assassination, Chavez threatened that if he were killed, he would be waiting for the US President in the afterlife. According to Chavez, the USG is wagering that killing him would incite a popular revolt that could be exploited to invade Venezuela. He warned that Venezuela would respond to such an attack by rising up against the United States and cutting off its oil supply. Chavez also accused the USG of "blackmail," "economic sabotage," and "killing the world." In a 30-minute screed littered with references to senior US officials, Chavez charged that the USG was "personalizing the problem."

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The World Revolves Around Caracas  
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[13.](#) (U) Chavez's speech demonstrated a typical, exaggerated view of Venezuela's geostrategic importance and of US media coverage of Venezuela. Chavez equated recent USG references to Venezuela in Congressional hearings with US efforts in 2003 to convince the international community that Iraq was a threat before attacking it. Overcoming the dispute with Colombia over the capture of senior FARC official Rodrigo Granda was likewise a "great defeat" for the United States, which had purportedly instigated the crisis to incite Colombia against Venezuela. Chavez also claimed that South American indigenous people had told him that if he were assassinated, a flame would be lit throughout the country and the region. Echoing Chavez, Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez before the OAS Permanent Council on 23 February defended Chavez's constant allusions to the United States by alleging each one had been in response to an attack from the USG, according to press reports.

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"Evidence"  
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[14.](#) (U) The GOV has offered no justification for its accusations. Before the Permanent Council of the OAS on February 23, Rodriguez alerted the organization that US claims that Venezuela was a "negative influence" and "destabilizing" amounted to signals that an attack was imminent. Without elaborating, Rodriguez said that "reports of intelligence bodies" signaled US intentions to kill Chavez. Information Minister Andres Izarra reiterated that Venezuela had intelligence also implicating the political opposition in plots against the President, but he refused to release it.

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Comment  
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15. (C) Several factors explain Chavez's latest accusations:

-- Chavez believes the US is targeting him, according to both GOV and opposition contacts. In the GOV interpretation of history, the assassination of Chavez and the invasion of Venezuela would be the logical next steps to failed US attempts to overthrow him, organize a general strike, recall him in a referendum, and stir up conflict between Venezuela and Colombia. Chavez's overestimation of his importance coupled with Castro's warnings probably have convinced him that the US is laying the groundwork for an attack, which he may hope to deter by alerting the international community.

-- Chavez is reinforcing his cult status among the Latin American left as the lone maverick willing to stand up to US "imperialism." He especially hopes to galvanize OAS members against the USG so he can become the chief steward of the process by which the organization drafts its Social Charter. He also plays to the crowd among his Venezuelan constituents, harnessing patriotism in support of his Bolivarian Revolution.

-- For Chavez, tales of US conspiracies serve to distract the Venezuelan public from his failures in governance. Although the GOV did not adopt preventative measures after 1999 floods killed tens of thousands near the Venezuelan coast, Chavez blamed the destruction from early February rains on Washington's failure to sign the Kyoto Protocol.

-- Chavez's claims reinforce his long-term effort to sow suspicion of the United States among Venezuelans. They also provide him justification for his politicization of the military and prepare the way for additional accusations of treason against domestic opponents.

16. (C) Chavez's remarks are not cost-free. They must affect how other countries, particularly Brazil, view Chavez. When viewed in conjunction with Information Minister Izarra's diatribes against the media, the comments appear especially paranoid. One question is how Foreign Minister Rodriguez's use of the same allegations might affect the GOV's goals of heading the OAS Social Charter preparation.

17. (C) Our public response has been just right. The Charge repeated the Spokesman's comments in a local radio interview February 24, adding that "we didn't know if President Bush was aware of Chavez's comments," a statement calculated to annoy President Chavez.  
McFarland